

# Still Atta

By Lt. Michael Ruth

I was a new helicopter second pilot and was experiencing my first real taste of shipboard operations. It was exciting, yet, I still was wary of the new environment. The initial DLQ qualification in the FRS, and a short, week-long work-up, made up my vast seagoing background flying the mighty SH-60B, LAMPS Mk-III attack helicopter.

Our detachment was operating off the Southern California coast on a work-up for our West-Pac deployment. The detachment had flown steadily throughout the exercise, and I was learning a lot during the short time onboard. I constantly tried to get an idea of the hazards and

concerns inherent in this new operating environment.

We were to launch on a night mission to search for surface contacts in the area. I was flying with one of the senior HACs in the detachment, and I was concerned about being prepared. I still was a little wary around the flight deck of a cruiser at night because of my inexperience. I was tense during night launch and recoveries. The weather this night wasn't extreme: a cloud deck at 1,000 feet and some occasional high rolls. It was my first very dark night, though, with no moon and a cloud deck—my stress level was increased.

We briefed, preflighted and manned-up for launch, progressing through the checklists.

Photo by PH2 David C. Mercil



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During prestart checks, we encountered a maintenance problem and called a troubleshooter. Since the troubleshooting took awhile and because of high rolls, we put on high point and tail chains. After the discrepancy was corrected, the high point and tail chains were removed. Flight-control checks and start-up went as planned.


Sitting in the left seat having winds to starboard, I had the takeoff. We called for breakdown and launch, and we noted two chains and a chock being removed from each side. The flight deck cleared us, and we were ready to lift. I called to the LSO, "Ready to lift."

He responded with the expected, "Beams open, green deck, lift." I brought in power for takeoff. Almost immediately on our way up to the hover, the helicopter shuddered, tugged left and back. What the heck? Something was not right! We steadied in the hover for a second and got a feel for the situation. Once we relaxed a bit, the HAC called for us, "...to put it back down." Upon hearing this, I lowered the collective, smoothly put the helo on the deck, and called for chocks and chains. With the helicopter secured to the deck, the troubleshooters checked for damage. They found a piece of chain attached to the deck and another still attached to the aircraft. Needless to say, the crew felt that was enough for the night. The aircraft was inspected for damage.

What had happened? Although the tail chain had been broken down, it was not removed. Neither of us noticed if they were removed before takeoff. We normally make sure the tail chains are removed before manning the aircraft—which we purposely did not do because of the high rolls. We double-check their removal by looking out the rear view mirror for them. If any chains are still attached, they are seen stretching from

the aircraft to the deck. In this case, the broken-down chain hung vertically and had been missed by everyone.

Anytime we deviate from normal operating procedures, we must look more closely at what is happening. The rough weather changed our pattern and should have alerted us to look for new hazards not normally encountered. Make sure your crew members are aware of your concerns before launching. I could not remember if I had briefed the crew that this was my first high sea-state, night flight from this class of ship. I was a little tense when facing those conditions that night.

Make sure the crew and the plane captains are aware of how the aircraft is secured to the deck. Since this incident, our detachment has implemented an added precaution with a walk-around by the plane captain before any launch. This doesn't relieve the aircrew of the responsibility but does add another safety check. Adequate communication—in this case, passing a complete inventory of the chains and chocks attached to the aircraft—could have prevented this problem. 

Lt. Ruth is the admin officer for HSL-47, Det 5 embarked in USS *Princeton* (CG 59).

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